

COUNCIL *on*  
FOREIGN  
RELATIONS

## Managing Global Disorder: Prospects for U.S.-Russian Cooperation

Relations between the United States and Russia have recently declined, but U.S., European, and Russian experts identify possible areas of cooperation for the two to work together to foster global stability.

*August 23, 2017*

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*In June 2017, the Council on Foreign Relations' Center for Preventive Action convened a workshop to examine areas of cooperation between the United States and Russia. The workshop was held at the Tufts University European Center in Talloires, France, and was made possible by the support of Carnegie Corporation of New York. The views described here are those of workshop participants only and are not CFR or Carnegie Corporation positions. The Council on Foreign Relations takes no institutional positions on policy issues and has no affiliation with the U.S. government.*

### **Introduction**

While relations between the United States and Russia have deteriorated in recent years, making it exceedingly difficult for both countries to collaborate in managing a variety of common concerns, emerging challenges to global order make such cooperation increasingly imperative. To explore where U.S.-Russia cooperation is desirable and, in some places, even necessary, the Center for Preventive Action at the Council on Foreign Relations convened an international group of twenty-three experts at the Tufts University European Center in Talloires, France, on June 9 and 10, 2017, for the workshop “Managing Global Disorder: Prospects for U.S.-Russian Cooperation.”

Workshop participants assessed U.S., Russian, and West European views of the sources of global disorder and identified potential areas of strategic cooperation that might help build a more solid foundation for mutual trust and security. They also discussed areas where these actors can work together on regional concerns in Europe, the Middle East, and Asia.

Participants agreed that, for all the friction and disagreement that currently affects U.S.-Russia relations, the situation could easily grow much worse. A further deterioration of the relationship would not only harm each country's own interests but would also make the collective management of other sources of global disorder much harder in the future.

## **Threats to World Order and Perspectives on Global Norms**

Participants concurred that the international order that has prevailed since the end of the Cold War is changing, though what will take its place remains unclear. New powers are emerging or reemerging on the world stage in ways that are causing friction and uncertainty. Nonstate actors are also growing more powerful and, in some cases, more dangerous. Collectively, these developments are placing growing stress on the established international norms and institutions that help to promote global order. Differences were evident in how U.S. and Russian participants interpreted these recent developments and the causes of growing international turbulence. To some, the principal source of instability has been the overzealous actions of the United States—particularly in the wake of 9/11—in promoting democracy, human rights, and regime change around the world in contravention of established principles of state sovereignty. To others, the disruptive and uneven consequences of globalization were the leading culprit. As a result, participants were also divided on prescriptions for restoring global order: to some, it involved returning to traditional notions of noninterference in the domestic affairs of states while others explored new obligations of state sovereignty in recognition of evolving

requirements. There was general agreement, however, that established global institutions need to be reformed and reinvigorated if they are to survive well into the twenty-first century.



*U.S. President Donald J. Trump speaks with Russian President Vladimir Putin during their bilateral meeting at the Group of Twenty (G20) summit in Hamburg, Germany, on July 7, 2017.*

*Carlos Barria/Reuters*

## **Potential Areas of Cooperation**

Participants largely agreed that taking incremental steps toward cooperation would be the best approach to improving U.S.-Russian relations, with the hope that these steps would build momentum toward further improvement. While legally binding agreements would be difficult to achieve in the current political climate, and legally binding multilateral agreements next to impossible, the United States and Russia could pursue more informal arrangements to work together.

Future cooperation in whatever form is unlikely, however, without a mutual recognition of interests. One participant argued that the United States needed to acknowledge Russia's legitimate interests, claiming that, currently, "the fact that Russia has legitimate interests is little accepted in the United States." Other participants pointed out that, while Russia has made some of its red lines clear (such as NATO or EU membership for certain states on its border), it has not officially communicated what its legitimate interests are.

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Nonetheless, participants identified areas where the United States and Russia could work together to foster stability and order, both in strategic and regional concerns.

#### *Strategic Cooperation*

All participants agreed on the importance of maintaining strategic stability and the integrity of existing global arms control regimes. Finding ways to reinforce these regimes while creating incentives for other nuclear weapons states to join them was also a focus of the discussion.

In April 2010, U.S. President Barack Obama and Russian President Dmitry Medvedev agreed on a nuclear arms reduction treaty, known as the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START). The treaty, which set limits on U.S. and Russian strategic arms, is set to expire in 2021 but it can be extended for up to five years. Some in the U.S. and Russian leadership support extending New START (though in a February 2017 phone to call to President Vladimir Putin, President Donald J. Trump denounced the agreement). One participant characterized the extension as “low-

hanging fruit” that is attractive to both sides and would foster stability and predictability not just between the United States and Russia but also among other nuclear weapons states, notably China. Participants noted the difficulties of making the extension legally binding, particularly if the United States and Russia hope to include other states in the regime, but argued that there would be benefits to a nonbinding political agreement to extend the treaty. One participant also argued that entering into dialogue about strategic stability is useful in and of itself and could also be utilized as a forum for military-to-military dialogue.

Another important arms control agreement between the United States and Russia is the Intermediate Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty, which prohibits the development of intermediate-range missiles. While both the United States and Russia have been accused of violating the agreement, several participants argued for the need to preserve it. Renegotiating the INF Treaty would be difficult and thus the best option would be to clarify its terms and reach new understandings to ensure compliance and attract other adherents.

In areas of strategic significance such as the development of offensive nuclear weapons, missile defense systems, cyberwarfare capabilities, and the use of outer space, participants agreed that the United States and Russia should focus on limiting worst-case scenarios. Additional transparency and confidence-building measures to reduce the grounds for mistrust and misunderstandings in crisis situations were generally seen as desirable.

#### *Regional Cooperation: Europe*

NATO expansion, the conflict in Ukraine, and Moscow’s intervention in European political processes are sources of tension among the United States, Russia, and Western Europe. Russian participants highlighted the divergent understandings of European security, arguing that while U.S. interventions in European states are considered stabilizing from a U.S. perspective, Russia considers such action disruptive to stability in Europe.

As with strategic issues, participants agreed that both sides should recognize the danger in the current situation in Europe and work on low-cost improvement measures, such as restoring military-to-military dialogue and mutually recognizing that the Trump administration does not seek regime change in Russia. NATO enlargement could also be an area of agreement, should Russia agree to respect the freedom of states to pursue NATO membership and the United States focuses on the security rationale for joining the alliance.

The two countries could also agree to refrain from influencing other nations' political outcomes or election results and to not use cyberattacks, smear campaigns, opposition movements, or other actions that would result in an "unpleasant surprise" at the end of an election campaign.

Participants discussed whether resolving the conflict in Ukraine is necessary to improving U.S.-Russian relations. While participants were not optimistic that the conflict could be resolved soon, they generally agreed that its resolution is not essential to improving U.S.-Russian relations. A stalemate could be accepted for the time being to allow both sides to focus on other issues where they are not in direct competition.

#### *Regional Cooperation: Middle East, Central Asia, and Asia-Pacific*

Participants identified encouraging areas where the United States and Russia could work together in regions beyond Europe.

##### *Middle East*

Many participants considered the prospects for cooperation in the Middle East to be promising. Both the United States and Russia have a significant presence in Syria and share an interest in resolving the country's civil war. And although Iran's involvement in Syria will remain a source of disagreement between Washington and

Moscow, cooperation is not impossible. While Iran is a strategic Russian ally, one participant pointed out that neither the United States nor Russia are ultimately interested in supporting Iranian ambitions in the region.

None of the actors involved in Syria have a clear vision for an outcome to the conflict, but some participants argued that Russia's interests there—including preserving Syria's statehood, creating stability, and ending the fighting—do not necessarily conflict with U.S. interests, so an agreement on a final political resolution to the conflict is not necessary for cooperation at this stage. Moreover, Russia has an interest in maintaining a U.S. role in negotiations. However, cooperation would depend on the United States communicating its objectives in Syria, which are not currently clear.

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### *Central Asia*

Participants generally agreed that the United States will not have a strong role in former Soviet states in Central Asia compared to Russia and China, and therefore prospects for cooperation in the region are limited. The region is also not a source of tension between Moscow and Beijing because Chinese involvement in the region does not currently challenge Russian political influence: Russia provides security and employment for Central Asians, while China provides economic development but no competing jobs for locals.

Participants identified Afghanistan as a possible area for cooperation. The U.S. goal (political reconciliation) and the Russian goal (eliminating instability on its border) are complementary. However, like in Syria, cooperation depends on clarifying U.S. policy and objectives in the country.

### *Asia-Pacific*

Cooperation in the Asia-Pacific is limited, as the United States has a larger role in the region than Russia does. While the United States seeks to challenge Chinese territorial claims, maintain a strong military presence, and reinforce alliances in the region, Russian policy is to not oppose China. Chinese-Russian relations are aided by China's treatment of Russia not as a junior partner in light of its decline and China's rise, but as an equal. Even given any mutual suspicion between the two states, they will continue to cooperate to resist U.S. influence in the region.

While participants noted that U.S. and Russian leaders should cooperate to address the threat from North Korea, the lack of leverage on all sides to influence the regime will remain an obstacle.

## **Recommendations**

Participants agreed that, though improving U.S.-Russian relations is difficult in the current political climate, the stakes of increased tension are high. To improve the relationship and increase the chances that the two major powers can work together to manage global disorder, workshop participants outlined options for both countries that they considered worth exploring. These included:

Create incident-prevention mechanisms to reduce the chances of miscalculation, direct conflict, and worst-case outcomes between the two nuclear powers.

Communicate to each country's public the importance of the U.S.-Russia relationship and the stakes should relations worsen, as cooperation would only

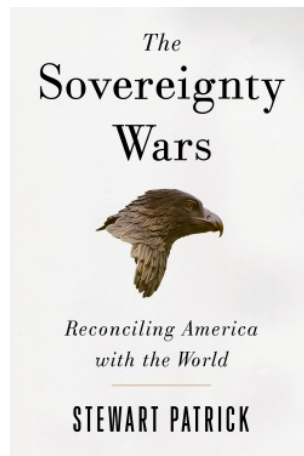


be possible if there were a political appetite for it.

Start strategic stability talks as a step in the right direction toward improving relations, but recognize that “big fixes” are not readily available.

Start a dialogue between NATO and the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), a low-cost measure that would send a strong message that both alliances seek to avoid conflict.

Open discussions to agree on basic cyber norms, such as avoiding targeting attacks on civilians during peace time.



## The Sovereignty Wars

*Reconciling America with the World*

Protecting sovereignty while advancing American interests in a global age

Book by Stewart M. Patrick

<i>Publisher –</i>	<i>Release Date –</i>	<i>Pages –</i>
Brookings Institution Press	Oct 2017	330

*ISBN 978-0-815-73159-7*

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Americans have long been protective of the country's sovereignty—beginning when George Washington retired as president with the admonition for his successors to avoid “permanent” alliances with foreign powers. Ever since, the nation has faced persistent, often heated debates about how to maintain that sovereignty, and whether it is endangered when the United States enters international organizations, treaties, and alliances about which Washington warned.

As the recent election made clear, sovereignty is also one of the most frequently invoked, polemical, and misunderstood concepts in politics—particularly American politics. The concept wields symbolic power, implying something sacred and inalienable: the right of the people to control their fate without subordination to outside authorities. Given its emotional pull, however, the concept is easily hijacked by political opportunists. By playing the sovereignty card, they can curtail more reasoned debates over the merits of proposed international commitments by portraying supporters of global treaties or organizations as enemies of motherhood and apple pie.

Such polemics distract Americans from what is really at stake in the sovereignty debate: namely, the ability of the United States to shape its destiny in a global age. The United States cannot successfully manage globalization, much less insulate itself from cross-border threats, on its own. As global integration deepens and cross-border challenges grow, the nation's fate is increasingly tied to that of other countries, whose cooperation will be needed to exploit the shared opportunities and mitigate the common risks of interdependence.

*The Sovereignty Wars* is intended to help today's policymakers think more clearly about what is actually at stake in the sovereignty debate and to provide some criteria for determining when it is appropriate to make bargains over sovereignty—and how to make them.

A Council on Foreign Relations Book